

Newsletter article #7

Keep it covered, please!

If you're trying to make your soil healthier, you shouldn't see it very often. In other words, soil should always be covered by growing plants, their residues, or a combination of the two.

Keeping the soil covered all the time makes perfect sense when you realize that healthy soils are full of life and that the microorganisms living in the soil have the same needs as other living creatures. They need food and cover to survive.

When you have a vegetative cover on the soil, especially a living cover, you offer those microbes both food and shelter. Some scientists say when you till the soil and remove crop residues, the effects are as devastating to soil microbes as a combination of an earthquake, hurricane, tornado, and forest fire would be to humans.

From the perspective of the living creatures within the soil, a tillage tool like a chisel shank has the effect of ripping the ground like an earthquake; removing residue is like a tornado ripping the roof off a house; uncovered soil can be drenched and whisked away by gushing water and wind like that of a hurricane—or scorched in the hot sun like an out-of-control fire.

To learn more about soil health, and to meet some of the farmers who are "Unlocking the Secrets in the Soil," visit www.nrcs.usda.gov.

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